There’s a meme going around that says, “Nobody talks about Jesus’ miracle of having 12 close friends in his 30’s.” It’s funny because it’s true.

Friendship is rare commodity these days. The demands of life, the mobility and transiency of the modern era, the deepening divides along political, racial and socio-economic lines all make friendship difficult, to say the least.

As a society, we seem almost nostalgic about friendship, as if it is something we once knew but have somehow forgotten. Perhaps this is why The Golden Girls and Friends are some of the most streamed shows today. These stories about unlike-ly (and un-alike) friends staying together, being there for each other no matter what seem almost impossibly romantic to our modern ears.

At the same time, loneliness is being reported in record numbers. It seems that as our world gets bigger and bigger (numerically and in global access to information, news, relationships and resources) we are dividing ourselves into smaller and smaller groups (conservatives and liberals and democrats and republicans and rich and poor). As the walls between the groups climb higher and higher, we begin to feel more and more isolated in an ever expanding world.

These divisions, which at first may be survival instincts responding to a rapidly expanding world, actually turn out to be the very things that make us feel so alone.

Such is the liturgy of modernity. As soon as someone says something we don’t like, we unfriend them. When we hurt someone else, we double down in our reasoning for hurting them rather than drawing near and saying, “I’m sorry.”

We whittle our friendships down until our worlds get smaller and smaller, and we find ourselves more and more isolated…less and less friendly…with fewer and fewer friends.
Before long we have ultra conservatives and ultra liberals and ultra rich and ultra poor and, in the end, the only people we have room to be friends with is ourselves.

We are a society of lonely people watching shows about friends because we have this sneaking suspicion that friendship is something we have lost along the way.

This is particularly troublesome for those of us who follow Jesus.

Jesus makes friendship the theatre of salvation.

That is, friendship is how God has chosen to save the world.

We can’t hear “friends” without hearing Jesus telling the disciples in John’s Gospel, “I no longer call you servants, I now call you friends.”

When God takes flesh in Jesus and calls us friends, God proclaims that it is not through hero worship, or political legislation or even through right rituals that God will save us.

This is nothing new, of course. The church mothers and fathers often called God “The Holy Friends.” Looking at the life of Trinity, friendship began to seem divine, as though God’s very self is comprised of an eternal friendship among Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And the mystery of the incarnation is that in the person of Jesus, God has incorporated humanity into God’s holy friendship.

Early on, Christians began to see themselves as people who had been befriended by God. By extension, they began to see friendship as the theatre of salvation. It was in our friendships that we found ourselves being saved. Holy friendships, like the divine friendship of the Trinity, became the most basic way of life among those who followed Jesus. They practiced friendships that were holy — that made them whole — and their friendships, like Trinity, always made room for the “other.”

Before long, Christians began to practice friendship in very particular ways with all sorts of people. According to Acts 2, they ate together, prayed together and learned together. Friendship was the only program we had; befriending others was our evangelism, our discipleship, and our worship.

We ascribed worth to the way of Jesus by making friends with neighbors, strangers and even enemies and breaking bread with them.

In a very real way, friendship became a matter of life and death for those who were seeking to follow Christ.

It still is.

The church remembering how to practice friendship in a way that saves us has never been more critical than it is today. The church’s main mission in a world that has forgotten how to be friends is to be an embodied reminder of the friendship that we were made from (Trinity) and for (communion).

We are the ones who understand God to have befriended us in Jesus, not because we were perfect, not because we think like God or act like God, but because friendship is the very nature of God.

What follows is a model for practicing holy friendship. It is loosely based on John Wesley’s early Class Meeting practices, and in that sense this is the most Methodist thing we can do.

Remembering how to practice friendship methodically, religiously, as if our life depends on it is our call today.

May you practice friendship with people who think like you and people who don’t.

May you practice friendship with people who live like you and people who don’t.

May you practice friendship with people who look like you and people who don’t.

May you practice friendship with people who vote like you and people who don’t.

May you practice friendship with your neighbors and even with those people who try to make you their enemies.

May you practice Holy Friendship until all heaven breaks out. — ZIG ZIGLAR

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At its most basic level, church is about becoming better friends

It is about becoming better friends WITH GOD

It is about becoming better friends WITH OUR NEIGHBORS

It is about becoming better friends WITH CREATION

Do you want to keep reading?
Contact Jill Murphy if you would like a copy of the Good Friends resource book @ 919.779.6115 ext 254 or jill.murphy@nccumc.org

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